

Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L VALLETTA 0028

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, UK, MT

SUBJECT: VISIT TO MALTA OF BRITISH DEFENSE SECRETARY MASON

SUMMARY

BRITISH DEFENSE SECRETARY MASON VISITED MALTA JANUARY 2-5, DURING WHICH HE MET WITH PRIME MINISTER MINTOFF. BOTH PRIVATELY, AND AT SUBSEQUENT PRESS CONFERENCE, MASON EMPHASIZED THAT THE BRITISH DECISION TO WITHDRAW THEIR MILITARY FORCES FROM MALTA BY MARCH 197 IS IRREVOCABLE. MINTOFF CLAIMED TO BE UNWORRIED ABOUT THE SECURITY OR ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES OF THE BRITISH WITHDRAWAL.

END SUMMARY

1. BRITISH SECRETARY OF STATE FOR DEFENSE ROY MASON, TAKING ADVANTAGE OF THE PARLIAMENTARY RECESS IN LONDON, VISITED MALTA JANUARY 2-5. THE PURPOSE WAS TO VISIT BRITISH ARMED FORCES HERE, WHICH MASON HAD NOT SEEN SINCE BECOMING DEFENSE SECRETARY. HE WAS ACCOMPANIED
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BY MRS. MASON, DR. A.E.P. DUFFY, HIS PARLIAMENTARY

PRIVATE SECRETARY, AND MR. C.A. WHITMORE, ASSISTANT UNDER SECRETARY (DEFENSE STAFF).

2. MOST OF MASON'S TIME WAS SPENT VISITING BRITISH ROYAL NAVY, RAF AND ARMY UNITS HERE, BUT HE HAD TWO MEETINGS WITH MINTOFF WHICH WERE DESCRIBED TO US BY THE BRITISH HERE AS "CALM AND FRIENDLY." NEITHER MASON NOR MINTOFF RAISED ANY MAJOR SUBSTANTIVE ISSUE, ALTHOUGH THE FORTHCOMING DEPARTURE OF UK FORCES IN THE APRIL 1977-MARCH 1978 PERIOD WAS DISCUSSED IN GENERAL TERMS. MINTOFF PROFESSED NOT TO BE CONCERNED ABOUT "FILLING THE GAP," AND HAS REITERATED THAT THERE COULD BE NO TURNING BACK FROM THE UK DECISION TO LEAVE WHEN THE PRESENT AGREEMENT EXPIRES. MINTOFF ACCEPTED THIS WITHOUT ARGUMENT, BUT EXPRESSED THE HOPE THAT BRITAIN WOULD CONTINUE ITS INTEREST IN THE MEDITERRANEAN.

3. MINTOFF WAS "QUIETLY CONFIDENT" OF SUCCESS IN THE GENERAL ELECTION LATER THIS YEAR. HE SAID THERE WAS A CONTINUING NEED FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND FOREIGN INVESTMENT IN MALTA AND HOPED BRITAIN WOULD CONTINUE TO BE HELPFUL IN CERTAIN AREAS SUCH AS MANPOWER TRAINING. HE HAD DISCUSSED THE POST-1979 SITUATION IN MALTA WITH THE ITALIANS AND LIBYANS, AS WELL AS WITH PRESIDENT GISCARD AND CHANCELLOR SCHMIDT AND VERY MUCH HOPED TO DO THE SAME SOON WITH PRIME MINISTER WILSON. (STILL SMARTING FROM WILSON'S REFUSAL TO SEE HIM ON HIS VISIT TO LONDON LAST MONTH, THIS WAS THE FIRST OF THREE POINTED REMINDERS TO MASON OF MINTOFF'S PRESSING NEED TO SEE WILSON.)

4. MINTOFF SAID THE POST-1979 PERIOD WOULD BE VERY IMPORTANT FOR EUROPE AND NORTH AFRICA BECAUSE OF "NEW POLITICAL FORCES AT WORK" IN THE MEDITERRANEAN COUNTRIES. HE HAD "NO FEAR" OF THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE BRITISH WITHDRAWAL FROM MALTA, ALTHOUGH HE CONTINUED TO HOPE FOR AN IMPROVED SECURITY SITUATION IN THE AREA, AS WELL AS IMPROVED ECONOMIC PROSPECTS. MALTA HAD AN IMPORTANT ROLE TO PLAY IN THE MEDITERRANEAN, CONFIDENTIAL

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AND WHILE HE WAS NOT SURE OF THE UK ROLE THERE IN THE POST-79 PERIOD, HE HOPED THE BRITISH WOULD DISCUSS MALTA'S POSITION WITH THE ITALIANS AND THE FRENCH.

5. MASON SAID HE WOULD CONVEY MINTOFF'S COMMENTS TO WILSON AND CALLAGHAN, BUT ADDED THAT BRITISH DEFENSE POLICY WAS HEAVILY ORIENTED TOWARD NATO. THEY HAD HAD NO SPECIFIC DISCUSSIONS WITHIN NATO

ABOUT THE POST-79 PERIOD IN MALTA BUT OF COUSE NATO
KNEW OF THEIR APPROACHING DEPARTURE FROM THE SCENE.
UNTIL THEN, MASON ASSURED THE PRIME MINISTER, BRITAIN
WOULD FULFULL ITS COMMITMENTS UNDER THE AGREEMENT.

6. MINTOFF AGAIN REFERRED TO THE NEW POLITICAL FORCES
AT WORK IN THE MEDITERRANEAN BUT THIS TIME MADE
SPECIFIC REFERENCE TO THE "LESS PRO-SOVIET ATTITUDES
OF THE COMMUNIST PARTIES IN FRANCE, ITALY, AND SPAIN."
HE SAID THE WEST SHOULD RECOGNIZE THIS NEW ATTITUDE
"AND BUILD ON IT."

7. AT A PRESS CONFERENCE ON JANUARY 4, MR. MASON
WAS ASKED IF IT WAS POSSIBLE THAT THE UK MIGHT REMAIN
IN MALTA AFTER MARCH 31, 1979. HE RESPONDED: "NO,
THE DECISION.. (TO LEAVE) STOOD. BRITAIN WAS NOT
LOOKING BEYOND 1979 SO FAR AS MALTA WAS CONCERNED
... THE RUNDOWN OF FORCES WOULD START IN APRIL 1977
AND BE COMPLETED BY THE END OF MARCH 1979." IN RESPONSE
TO OTHER QUESTION, MASON SAID THAT ANY RENEWAL OF
THE BASES AGREEMENT AFTER 1979 "WAS OUT OF THE QUESTION.
IT WOULD BE WRONG TO SAY OTHERWISE AND TO RISK
MISLEADING ANYONE OR RAISING HOPES. IF NATO WERE TO
TAKE A DECISION THAT THE ALLIANCE WISHED TO REMAIN
THAT WOULD BE A DIFFERENT MATTER. IT WOULD BE UP TO
NATO, IN THE NEXT THREE YEARS, TO DETERMINE WHETHER
MALTA'S GEOGRAPHICAL POSITION REQUIRED THE PRESENCE
OF A NATO POWER. NATO HAD NOT YET CONSIDERED THE
HATTER."

8. COMMENT: MASON'S VIGOROUS REAFFIRMATION THAT
BRITISH FORCES WERE LEAVING MALTA AND THAT THERE
WAS NO CHANCE OF ENEWING THE AGREEMENT MAY HAVE
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COME AS A BLOW TO THE OPPOSITION NATIONALIST PARTY
LEADERS HERE, MANY OF WHOM HAVE BEEN DELUDING
THEMSELVES THAT IF THEY WON THE ELECTION THEY COULD
SIMPLY ASK THE BRITISH TO REMAIN. MASON MADE
ABUNDANTLY CLEAR THAT THIS WOULD NOT HAPPEN. SMITH

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